

(50)

CHAPTER EIGHT

593
528 MY mother, who had strict ideas about keeping her household a neat family unit of father, mother and children, without dependent aunts and other relatives, had equally strong views about the maintenance of our family ties and traditions, especially as we were now having a Western upbringing in the English schools and not many counteracting lessons at home. Once a year at least, she thought, we should go to have the roots of our beginnings stirred and kept alive. When the younger children were old enough to travel easily, therefore, we went away for each summer vacation.

For her own home, my mother thought a short visit would suffice; the longer visit was paid to my father's family because he could never come with us to see them. In any case, the visits to Thaton were dull for children in those growing up days, all my mother's family like herself had gone into a more worldly life and were settled in their respective professions. The main part of the great house was shut up and empty, and my mother took us there just for a few days to see my aunt, pay a visit to the hpongyi, and to inspect rubber estates which we had just outside Thaton. Then we journeyed on to Ye where my father's family were still living the life he had planned for them when he worked to buy my grandmother her plots of paddy-land.

Our visits to Ye were pure delight. In childhood any change in itself makes a holiday, and the change from our district life to the life at Ye was very great indeed.

528
• 489
361 A railway had been built from Moulmein to Ye in 1925; it ended at Ye where passengers travelling further crossed the creek and continued in buses for about 100 miles of mountain road to Tavoy. This was the only overland route to the Tenasserim coast below Ye. We crossed the Martaban-Moulmein ferry in the early morning, ate breakfast with friends while waiting for the connection, and arrived at Ye about 5 in the evening. Ye was by then the headquarters of a township and had a population of about 2,000. It was an extremely congested little town, for the number of its houses and inhabitants had just multiplied without any great changes in its original plan or acreage. The two main streets ran parallel to the creek, and along them the Talaing houses were packed, with only three to four feet of space between every few houses to give access from creek to road and from one road to another.

240 THE SOUL OF A PEOPLE CH.

231 aboriginal wild pony as to be incapable of very much training. But they are willing; they will go for ever, and are very strong, and they have admirable constitutions and tempers. You could not make a Burman ill-use his pony if you tried, and I fancy that to break these little half-wild ponies to go in cabs in crowded streets requires severe treatment. At least, I never knew but one hackney-carriage driver either in Rangoon or Mandalay who was a Burman, and he very soon gave it up. He said that the work was too heavy either for a pony or a man. I think, perhaps, it was for the safety of the public that he resigned, for his ponies were the very reverse of meek—which a native of India says a hackney-carriage pony should be—and he drove entirely by the light of Nature.

563
231
493 So all the drivers of gharries, as we call them, are natives of India or half-breeds, and it is amongst them that the work of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals principally lies. While I was in Rangoon I tried a number of cases of over-driving, of using ponies with sore withers and the like. I never tried a Burman. Even in Rangoon, which has become almost Indianized, his natural humanity never left the Burman. As far as Burmans are concerned, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals need not exist. They are kinder to their animals than even the members of the Society could be. Instances occur every day; here is one of the most striking that I remember.

● 489 There is a town in Burma where there are some troops stationed, and which is the headquarters of the civil administration of the district. It is, or was

XIX 'NOBLESSE OBLIGE' 241

then, some distance from a railway-station, and it was necessary to make some arrangement for the carriage of the mails to and from the town and station. The Post-office called for tenders, and at length it was arranged through the civil authorities that a coach should run once a day each way to carry the mails and passengers. A native of India agreed to take the contract—for Burmans seldom or never care to take them—and he was to comply with certain conditions and receive a certain subsidy.

There was a great deal of traffic between the town and station, and it was supposed that the passenger traffic would pay the contractor well, apart from his mail subsidy. For Burmans are always free with their money, and the road was long and hot and dusty. I often passed that coach as I rode. I noticed that the ponies were poor, very poor, and were driven a little hard, but I saw no reason for interference. It did not seem to me that any cruelty was committed, nor that the ponies were actually unfit to be driven. I noticed that the driver used his whip a good deal, but then some ponies require the whip. I never thought much about it, as I always rode my own ponies, and they always shied at the coach, but I should have noticed if there had been anything remarkable. Towards the end of the year it became necessary to renew the contract, and the contractor was approached on the subject. He said he was willing to continue the contract for another year if the mail subsidy was largely increased. He said he had lost money on that year's working. When asked how he could possibly have lost considering the large number of people who were always

242 THE SOUL OF A PEOPLE CH.

489 passing up and down, he said that they did not ride in his coach. Only the European soldiers and a few natives of India came with him. Officers had their own ponies and rode, and the Burmans either hired a bullock-cart or walked. They hardly ever came in his coach, but he could not say what the reason might be.

489 231 So an inquiry was made, and the Burmese were asked why they did not ride on the coach. Were the fares too high?—was it uncomfortable? But no, it was for neither of these reasons that they left the coach to the soldiers and natives of India. It was because of the ponies. No Burman would care to ride behind ponies who were treated as these ponies were—half fed, overdriven, whipped. It was a misery to see them; it was twice a misery to drive behind them. 'Poor beasts!' they said; 'you can see their ribs, and when they come to the end of a stage they are fit to fall down and die. They should be turned out to graze.

The opinion was universal. The Burmans preferred to spend twice or thrice the money and hire a bullock-cart and go slowly, while the coach flashed past them in a whirl of dust, or they preferred to walk. Many and many times have I seen the roadside rest-houses full of travellers halting for a few minutes' rest. They walked while the coach came by empty; and nearly all of them could have afforded the fare. It was a very striking instance of what pure kind-heartedness will do, for there would have been no religious command broken by going in the coach. It was the pure influence of compassion towards the beasts and refusal to be a party to such